THE RITCHIE BLACKMORE INTERVIEW

Why did you change the band? People were shocked when your singer Ronnie Dio left Rainbow.

It's very easy to put someone down if they're not there to actually back up the other person... every time I pick up the paper, if it's someone I've worked with they usually say bad things about me, so I don't like to talk. It's very hard. Usually if a band has gone different ways then obviously you've had some kind of confrontation so far as not getting on. I think Ronnie thought he could do better and I wasn't particularly interested in taking him along with what I was doing so we gradually grew apart and he's into other things... so I thought it was best if he went his way and I went mine. He wanted to change his music and get into other things, let's just say that.

After three or four years I tend to get tired of the people I'm working with and I tend to change a lot, and it's nothing detrimental to them, I'm just trying to get the best band I can for the public, I'm not trying to be a moody bastard. I could play safe and just stay with the same line up and think who cares, let's just keep playing. But I don't like doing that, that's why I left Deep Purple, I just couldn't be bothered with the same people all the time, I wanted to do something new. I do the same type of music all the time, but I like to do it with different players. I think you have more initial excitement if you have a new band.

You had some other changes... Roger Glover in.

First Roger came in just to write, and then he ended up... he was so good on the bass, I didn't think he'd make it but he sounded so good that he's the best bass player we've ever had . . . at last we actually heard the bass coming through which we've never had before. Roger has ideas, he's a good production guy . . . he's a very three dimensional thinker, he doesn't just think of the bass guitar he thinks of songs, he thinks of ideas, he tries to get the best out of a lot of people. And I needed that in the band, I felt a little bit on my own, like I was pulling everybody along and it was getting a little bit tiring.

So now Roger's in the band and he's such an optimist, which I'm not... I'm usually a bit of a pessimist, a realist, but he's an optimist and he gets everybody going, saying "Come on lads, let's do it", whereas before it was a bit of a chore to get anything done. But with Roger he's really nice to have around in that respect, and he puts out a lot of good songs too which helps.

What do you mean when you say that he came in just as a writer?

At first he came in just as a writer and a producer... we had no intention of using him as the new bass player until he played. The bass player we had, someone we had for a short period, wasn't quite good enough so we used Roger on one track, then two tracks and in the end we said, 'Well, would you mind playing on the whole LP?' And he said 'No'. And we were thinking of looking for another bass player but he proved to be so good we just said to him at the end of it "Would you like to join?" and he said "Yes!". "Great, you're in".

Is he looking forward to going back on the road?

Oh yes, he's really excited, he hasn't played on stage for five or six years, but he's got a lot of good mental ideas, so that'll be interesting to see Rog. Another new man is Don Airey, he's a keyboard player and he used to be with Colosseum II. He used to be a very good jazz player, a brilliant classical player and he's a very good rock player. That's what I wanted, someone who could play classical very well but also rock, and that's why I got Don in. I like that challenge on stage, that competition thing, that I can play something and someone else can take over. I don't like the whole responsibility of taking over on stage although I do tend to use it, but I like to split it up a lot.

Funnily enough I like to listen to keyboards... I'd prefer to listen to a good church organist playing something like Bach than I would a lead guitar wailing away playing some nonsense . . . I don't know why but I don't like the sound of too many guitars too much, I think I've heard it for too long.

Listening to people like Larry Fast is very good... Walter Carlos... my record collection consists mostly of records by them, I don't have any guitarists, I have a few B B Kings . . . Jan Akkerman's good because he played the classical guitar. But I don't buy anything by the latest... you know. Jeff Beck is a very good guitarist but I wouldn't buy an LP of his, because Jeff is Jeff. He's a great guitarist but I don't like the type of music he is playing at the moment... he plays it brilliantly but I don't like the actual theme of what he's doing.

And now you also have a new singer, Graham Bonnet?

Yes, he sang with the Marbles, I don't know if you remember the Marbles, an incredible singer...

Yeah, 'Only One Woman', right?

Yeah, when I heard that in '69 I couldn't believe the vocal, and we said "Whatever happened to him?" and we found him out. He was big in Australia and nowhere else apparently...

He's a great singer and I think that people will be very pleased with him. He's very dynamic... you have to watch the guy because he's a virtuoso as a vocalist, he's just not a poser stereotype kind of hand on hips and all that nonsense you know, he can sing and there's very few of them around. That's why it took us so long to get this thing going, because I wouldn't settle for a second best singer. I didn't think we'd ever get it going because we had the backing tracks down a long time ago, but we just couldn't find the right singer. Nobody could hit the high notes... he's got a three octave range, which is amazing.

So how did you find him exactly?

We found him through a few producers... I said to Roger, "Whatever happened to the guy in the Marbles?" and Roger said, "I think somebody did a session with him about six months back" and he checked with a producer who checked with an A & R guy they found him in England. He'll definitely make his mark as a singer.

And that's it... Cozy is still with us because you can't get any better than Cozy, you know... he's always up there on stage going crazy, he always pushes me on when I look round, he always gives me that incentive to play because Cozy won't let anybody take it easy.

So we come to the new album now, where did you record it?

We recorded it in France in a place called the Chateau du Palais, which was a castle, because I love recording in castles. I don't know why, maybe it's reincarnation, but I just love mucking around in castles, so we got together in this castle just outside Geneve and we hired the mobile of Moulin Rouge. Ian Anderson, well actually Jethro Tull, the group, owns it. I was slightly biased there, because I think he has one of the best bands around so I wanted to use the sound that he had. It's a very good sound, very clear, very powerful.

The mobile's like a lorry, so we took it along to the castle and just passed the leads through the window and played in the old dining room, which was a massive dining room... we got an excellent drum sound, I'm very pleased with that. We all lived in the castle and got up to our usual pranks. It was in February of this year. It was haunted as usual, it has to be haunted otherwise I don't go there. It would be much cheaper for me to record in America, but I don't like to. I have to get back to Europe to get the feeling. America's a great place but I can't take too much of it, because it lacks the culture. I'm not trying to be snobbish but it drives me crazy.

When did you begin playing the guitar?

When I was 11 years old. I picked up my first guitar because of Tommy Steele, I liked him a lot. I played in skiffle groups.

It was a Framus guitar. I think it was German. Eight guineas it cost. My father said to me, "If you don't learn how to play this I'm going to put it across your head", because times were hard and he didn't do too bad because a few years back I bought them a new house, so now I think he is quite impressed.

Why did you choose the guitar?

I loved the way it looked. I think it was like a woman, it had the same shape. I used to love to look in the mirror and hold this beautiful thing.

Why do you now play a Fender Stratocaster?

I think because I liked the way it looked on Hendrix, and I liked the way it sounded. It's a very difficult guitar to master and play properly. With a Gibson for instance I found myself running up and down the neck, and the Gibson is a little bit fuzzy. You can get away with a lot on a Gibson, but you can never actually make a musical statement with a Gibson. It never hits you in the stomach... you just hear this same sound that everybody else has got, this Les Paul sound, and you haven't got a clue who is playing the guitar until it's announced.

A Strat has its own identity, and you have to get that much more into the guitar to bring out the identity of yourself, otherwise you will be lost. I think a Gibson is a more refined instrument, but a Fender has such an identity, which you have to bring out. With a Gibson you can be anybody who can play adequately and you will sound the same as a million other people, because you will not get any other sound out of these pick ups, and I don't know why. But each Fender has a slightly different sound, and they are more difficult to play. It took me about two years to make the transition from a Gibson to a Fender, it really was a challenge.

The first Strat I played was Eric Clapton's, around 1968. His roadie gave it to me because it had a bent neck, and I liked the sound of it although the tuning and intonation was all over the place. But it was a challenge, it was so rewarding to get the right note out of a Strat compared to a Gibson.

Are your guitars custom made?

No, never. I just buy them in a shop. It's like a suit of clothes, I like to buy them in a shop because they seem to fit much better than if you ask someone to make them... they never seem to fit properly.. they're always too baggy or whatever. I like things that I can just pick up. If I have something made for me I never really know if it is right, whereas if I go into a shop and try 20 guitars I know if it's right. I know that I can turn around and say, "I don't like it and I don't want it", whereas if someone makes me a guitar I have to take it.

How many guitars do you own?

I own I think about eight.. at the beginning of a tour I own many and at the end about eight.

You smash them?

Yeah, I smash every one except for the eight which are my favourite guitars. It's a form of sadism against bad workmanship. I go through a smashing period because the guitars are not very good, so I break them up, and I feel good. I go back to the hotel and have a good night's sleep and feel that I have done something good in the world.

I don't plan it, it's just the final thing, the final blow, if I am excited and having a good show and the public are excited, then I usually break up my guitar. If I don't break it then something has gone wrong with the show. Either I don't like how the public were or I don't like how we played. Funnily enough if I break the guitar, then that is a good thing, it means that I've done the utmost in my playing and I've finally broken it as the last resort and that is my final statement. But if I don't break my guitar it means that I am kind of half ashamed of what I have played during the evening.

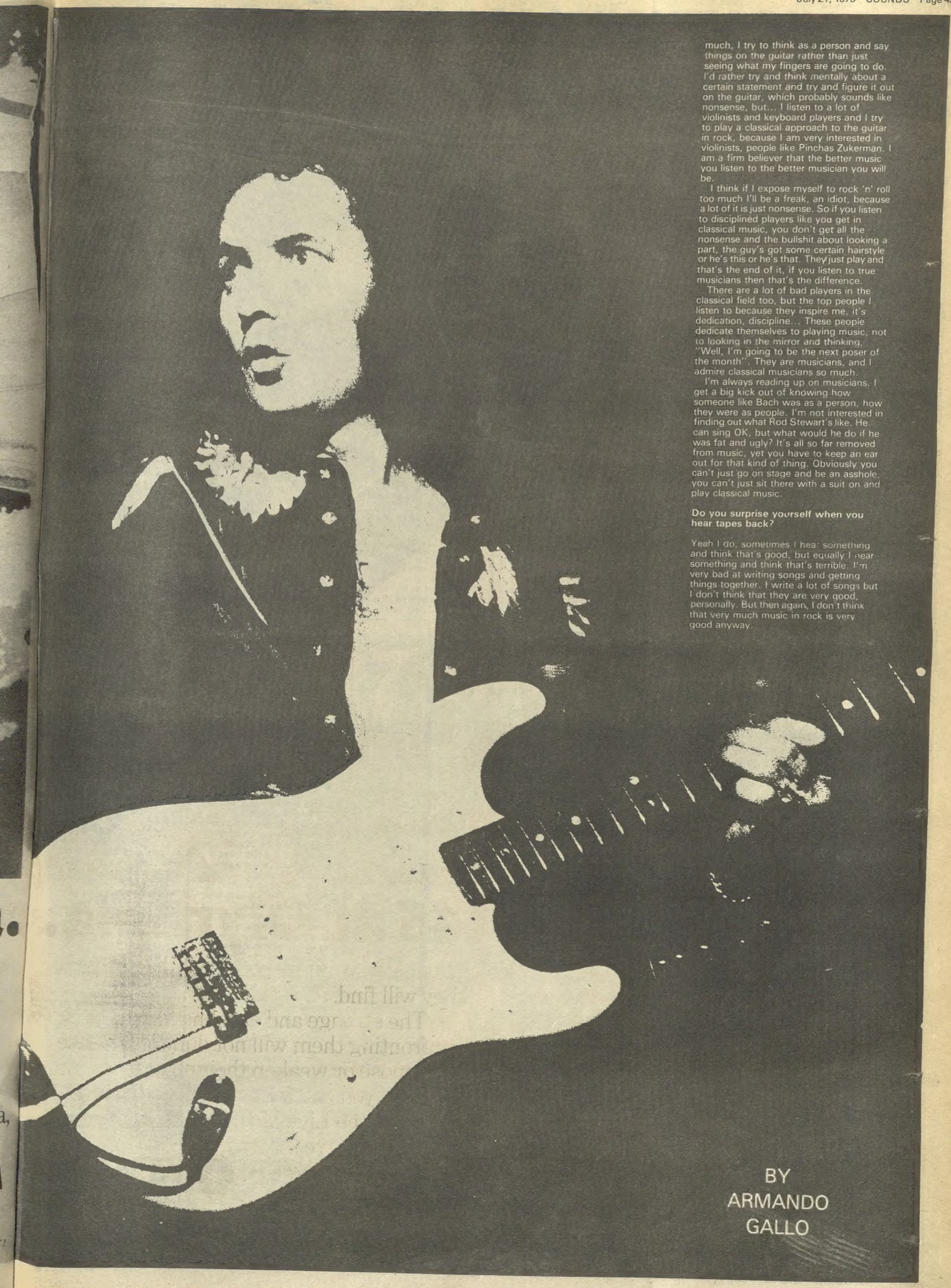
Some people reading this might feel that you don't treat the instrument which you use for your expression in the right way.

You could easily think this. I change guitars for the last number. The last number is usually party time, everybody up on their feet and putting their hats on, and let's all jump up and down and smash things up. So long as nobody gets hurt, that's the main thing. I don't want anybody to get hurt, including myself, I have hurt myself quite a few times throwing the guitar around. It's just my final statement, party time. I like people to go away thinking "yes, that was something different". It's like the Russians throwing their vodka glasses into the fireplace.

How do you practise?

On my head, standing on my head... No, I used to practise a lot. For the first 15 years of playing I practised four or five hours a day. Now I don't practise that much. I have half hour or hour sessions of just single string kind of studies, improvisations.

I don't try to get into the guitar too



much, I try to think as a person and say things on the guitar rather than just seeing what my fingers are going to do. I'd rather try and think mentally about a certain statement and try and figure it out on the guitar, which probably sounds like nonsense, but... I listen to a lot of violinists and keyboard players and I try to play a classical approach to the guitar in rock, because I am very interested in violinists, people like Pinchas Zukerman. I am a firm believer that the better music you listen to the better musician you will be.

I think if I expose myself to rock 'n' roll too much I'll be a freak, an idiot, because a lot of it is just nonsense. So if you listen to disciplined players like you get in classical music, you don't get all the nonsense and the bullshit about looking a part, the guy's got some certain hairstyle or he's this or he's that. They just play and that's the end of it, if you listen to true musicians then that's the difference.

There are a lot of bad players in the classical field too, but the top people I listen to because they inspire me, it's dedication, discipline... These people dedicate themselves to playing music, not to looking in the mirror and thinking, "Well, I'm going to be the next poser of the month". They are musicians, and I admire classical musicians so much.

I'm always reading up on musicians. I get a big kick out of knowing how someone like Bach was as a person, how they were as people. I'm not interested in finding out what Rod Stewart's like. He can sing OK, but what would he do if he was fat and ugly? It's all so far removed from music, yet you have to keep an ear out for that kind of thing. Obviously you can't just go on stage and be an asshole, you can't just sit there with a suit on and play classical music.

Do you surprise yourself when you hear tapes back?

Yeah I do, sometimes I hear something and think that's good, but equally I hear something and think that's terrible. I'm very bad at writing songs and getting things together. I write a lot of songs but I don't think that they are very good, personally. But then again, I don't think that very much music in rock is very good anyway.

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